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CONVENTIONALISM
IN
ANCIENT AMERICAN ART.

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CONVENTIONALISM

IN

ANCIENT AMERICAN ART.

BY

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Cambridge, Mass.*

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CONVENTIONALISM
IN ANCIENT AMERICAN ART.

BY F. W. PUTNAM.

THE study of the ceramic art of ancient America is productive of much that is of importance in showing the connections between the various peoples who have inhabited the country in past times, their points of contact, and the routes of their migrations. It also enables us to trace the development of that innate principle of the human mind which among all nations finds its varied expression in ornament and art. There is now sufficient evidence to show that the artistic powers of man, like the languages, were developed in distinct centres, from primitive forms of expression which, necessarily, had principles in common. This will, probably, account for the close resemblances which occur in the early expressions of art in different and widely separated centres, and the resultant cosmopolitan forms of various objects. Thus it is that we find in the lower stratum of human development many cooking vessels, water jars, dishes and other utensils made of clay,

that are of the same form and style of ornamentation ; but after the particular form of vessel desired was attained, and the early methods of ornament by finger marks, indentures, scratches, cross-lines, and the imprint of cord or fabric, had been carried to their full extent, we can easily understand that something higher would follow. This advanced step is represented in various ways by different prehistoric peoples, but it is when this step is taken that the imprint is given to the art of each.

Among other ways, this higher expression seems to be shown in the realistic representation of inanimate and animate objects, often of a mythological or historical character. In course of time, as art attained increased power of expression, it progressed beyond mere realism and led to the representation of an object by certain conventional characters, without that close adherence to nature which was at first necessary to a clear understanding of the idea intended to be conveyed. Thus conventionalism began. Side by side with this conventional representation of objects are found realistic forms,— conservatism, which is such a strong characteristic of primitive peoples, leading to both methods of expression at the same time.

As already stated, it is during this stage of the art of a people that a special imprint is given, and the line of development which follows is so marked that the particular art of one centre of development can be traced as it spreads and infringes upon another. While a comparison of these various forms of art expression may not necessarily prove the routes which different peoples have travelled in their migrations, it does indicate their points of contact, and to this extent it is so important to a proper understanding of their history that it cannot be neglected.

In the course of my studies in this direction, I was led, some years since, to investigate these realistic and con-

ventional forms and I have called attention to some of the interesting features noticed in the pottery from the stone-graves of the Cumberland valley in Tennessee and from the burial mounds of Missouri and Arkansas.¹

As a knowledge of this conventionalism is important to our studies I have traced it in the art of those American peoples among whom it has had an existence, although, it is proper to add, it was not developed among them all. With the ancient Mexicans, for instance, their higher ceramic art was more symbolical than conventional, using this latter term with the meaning here given to it. The ancient Peruvians, too, west of the region influenced by the Aymaras, or their predecessors in the vicinity of Lake Titicaca, seem to have been lacking in these methods of conventional representation, and their highest art may be called realism, to which is often added the expression of an action. In the region of Lake Titicaca another type of art expression exists, and while our collection from this region is still meagre there is enough to show a remarkable resemblance to those early old-world forms which culminated in the classical type of the Mediterranean peoples.

In the conventionalism represented on the Cumberland valley pottery, the head of a mammal is one of the most instructive studies. There are, however, other forms less marked, which indicate a contact with the Missouri and Arkansas potters, in whose art the fish, the frog, the owl, the human form and the squash, are the most prominent objects conventionalized. In Nicaragua, the principal forms conventionalized are the animal heads on the feet of tri-

¹ Communications on this subject were made to the Boston Society of Natural History in 1879; to the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1879; to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1882; and in lectures at the Peabody Museum and in other places, since 1878, but the details have not been published. I have, however, long had series arranged in the Peabody Museum at Cambridge to show the several groups of conventionalized forms.

poes, the human face, and the face combined with the serpent, moulded on the burial jars, although other forms are treated in an interesting manner.

THE ANIMAL HEAD ON POTTERY FROM TENNESSEE.

An illustration of conventionalism, as seen in the pottery from the stone-graves of Tennessee, is shown in the figures on Plate I.

Figures 1 and 2 are of a vessel rudely realistic, representing the head of an animal. As vessels in every way similar to this are found among the Missouri pottery, it is probable that this form had a single origin. The treatment here given to this animal head has resulted in an unsymmetrical vessel of rude form, not at all pleasing to the eye. An attempt to correct this lack of symmetry is shown in figure 4, in which the ears have been pushed back and the eyes forward, while to offset the nose and mouth on the front, a knob, which we may call a tail, has been placed opposite; but still we cannot say that the effect is pleasing, for here we observe the absence of the natural relation of parts without compensation in other ways.

In the next vessel, figure 3, we see a higher expression, and realism has slightly given way to the desire for symmetry. Here we see the effort to make a symmetrical vessel and also to add two handles, while at the same time the character of the animal head is retained. The nose, eyes and ears are represented, on each side of the vessel, in a row from handle to handle.

In figures 5 and 6, the nose and mouth form the central object on one-half of the vessel, with an eye on each side. On the opposite half, the tail and an ear on each side are the balancing features, and a handle is placed in the centre between the eye and ear on each side.

With this arrangement of the parts, conventionalism has full play, and in figures 7 and 8 are seen two vessels on which the nose, eye, ear and tail are rudely represented in the same positions as in the preceding. Several other vessels are of the same character, but slightly modified in the more or less realistic representation of the several parts, until, finally, the climax of conventionalism in this direction is reached in the vessel shown in figure 9, where the nose, tail, eyes and ears are represented by six round knobs of equal size, holding the positions assigned to the several features in the preceding figures.

In this last specimen realistic work has entirely given way to symmetry, and a common cooking pot has become chaste in style as the result of a development of artistic feeling.

All the examples to which I have referred are from the stone-graves in the burial places of a people who must have lived in towns near together in the Cumberland valley. Unfortunately, we cannot ascertain how long it took for this development, but that these burial places contain the dead of many generations there is no doubt.²

OTHER FORMS CONVENTIONALIZED.

In the case of the fish, particularly in the pottery from the St. Francis valley in Arkansas, the realistic forms are of the same character as the mammal's head in the preceding figures 1 and 2, from Tennessee, and the line of conventionalism is carried out on similar principles; that is, the

²It is important to state that the study of the art of this ancient people is based upon a collection derived from over six thousand of the singular stone-graves in the Cumberland valley, which were opened by myself or by assistants working under my direction. I was in particular aided by the faithful labors of the late Mr. Edwin Curtis, of Nashville, who for several years acted as my principal assistant in the Cumberland valley and in Arkansas. It is also important to state that in all these graves there was not a single object found indicating contact with Europeans.

vessel, first in the form of a fish, gradually loses its pisc shape, and either the dorsal and anal fins alone are left serve as handles, or the head and tail are reduced to simple knobs for that purpose.

In the case of the frog, also largely used in Misso and Arkansas art, the realistic representations are common, but in the process of conventionalism the legs the frog become ridges on the sides of the vessel and serve as handles. It is an interesting fact that there are vessels from Nicaragua which have the same conventional ornaments on their sides; but as I have not seen any intermediate forms between them and the realistic frog, which also occurs in Nicaraguan work, I cannot assert positively that this conventionalized form is here actually derived from the frog, although it seems probable.

In the bird, human and squash forms, particularly prominent in the jars from the Missouri burial mound, the modifications are principally at the top of the vessel and all three forms are conventionalized to a simple type having the appearance of an intermediate form. From casual examination of the series of Missouri pottery in the Museum, having these forms, it would be easy to conclude that the jars in the shape of women were a development from those of the squash form, were it not that the realistic work in every case preceded the conventional.

THE HUMAN FACE ON POTTERY FROM NICARAGUA.

The many ways of treating the human face as an ornament on ancient pottery from Nicaragua is an interesting study, and its combination with the serpent is a remarkable feature in this old art to which I shall refer on another occasion. For the present only one of the methods is considered, and this is selected on account of its close re-

ne semblance to the treatment of the animal head on the jars
to from Tennessee. In fact the underlying principle in both
n- is the same.

ri Plate II contains figures of the human face as seen on
n- seven small vessels from ancient burial places near together
of in Nicaragua.

re In figure 1, we have a well carved human face. In this
ls effort the potter evidently did his best to make a symmet-
r- rical head and the only lack is in the eyes, one of which is
le apparently represented as closed and the other half closed,
r- or with the upper lid drawn down. The realism is further
st shown by the stud-like ornaments in the enlarged ear-
n lobes.

y Figure 2 is still realistic in the portions represented,
y but the mouth is absent, and the nose and eyes are the
l, prominent features, while the ears are rudely done.

1, In figure 3 the several features are distinctly presented
, and each one is characteristically represented.

1 In figure 4 the same method of showing the parts of the
a face is followed, but from the eyes extend lines represent-
3 ing the eyebrows. This is probably the beginning of the
3 combination of the serpent with the face as shown in
t another series.

1 Figure 5 shows all the features, but each is reduced to
its characteristic parts.

In figure 6 the eyes and ears are nearly the same as in
the preceding, but the nose has become simply a round
knob. The mouth has now disappeared in this series of
conventionalized forms, and, finally, in figure 7, the nose,
eyes and ears are all reduced to simple knobs formed of
pinches of clay added to the surface of the jar, thus rep-
resenting the several features of the face in the same
manner as in the jar from Tennessee. Although the ar-

rangement of the parts in the ultimate forms of the two groups is different, the realistic beginnings of the two series are similar, and the method of conventionalization is the same in principle.

THE FISH ON THE FEET OF TRIPODS FROM CHIRIQUI.

The recent acquisition by the Peabody Museum of a large collection of pottery from the ancient graves in Chiriqui, Panama, has drawn my attention again to the conventional representation of the fish upon the feet of the tripods, where the whole purpose to be served seems to be simply and purely ornamental. This is the more probable from the fact that other animals, and even the human form, are represented on other tripods from the same graves. I have selected the fish for illustration, as the series belonging to this group is larger and more perfect than the others.

In the two figures represented on Plate III, the shape of these tripods is shown. In one, the legs are plain, in the other, they are ornamented in such a manner as to give several of the special features of a fish. On each of the feet, in the latter, we see the projecting and wide mouth, the eyes, the pectoral fins, and a forked tail. The space where the dorsal fins naturally would be placed was cut away before the vessel was baked, and through this slit can be seen the movable ball of clay with which these hollow legs are generally provided.

In not a single instance is there an attempt to represent the anal fin, which would have its natural position on the opposite, or inner side of the foot of the vessel. Its absence can be taken as another evidence that this treatment is purely for ornament, and it probably owed its origin to the fact that the potter, realizing the adaptability of the

fish to his purposes, gave way to his fancy and added to his art that of the sculptor.

On Plates IV-VII, are shown this series of feet from tripods, illustrating the different ways in which this primitive conception became conventionalized by the prehistoric people of Chiriqui, who carved in stone as well as in clay, and who were also remarkable for their work in copper and gold, in which materials their realistic and conventional art followed a course similar to that shown in their pottery.

Plate IV. Figure 1 is a plain foot of a tripod and shows the adaptability of this form to the essential external characters of a fish.

Figure 2 is a rudely realistic representation of a fish, with mouth, eyes, two dorsal fins, and the pectoral and ventral fins on the sides. All are in approximately natural positions, while the caudal fin is represented as an horizontal instead of a vertical termination of the body. The manner in which the several features are here shown must be kept in mind as we follow out the series, particularly the central indentures in the small oval pieces of clay representing the eyes, and the incised lines running from the body on the bits of clay which indicate the dorsal and paired fins, although these details are sometimes omitted.

In figure 3 the ventral fins are not represented, while the pectoral, dorsal, and caudal fins are shown nearly as in figure 2, except that the pectorals are placed close to the mouth. In the raised bands representing the upper jaw, the outline of the mouth is retained as in figure 2; but here artistic license comes into play, and the lower jaw is brought up to a level with the upper, and as the whole space allowed for representing the head is thus disposed of, the eyes are placed forward of the mouth, at a point where this foot joins the body of the vessel.

The Chevron Ornament. Plate V. Figures 1, 2 and 3, are from one tripod, and this is the only instance in the series where the three feet of a vessel are not essentially the same, and even here there is a general similarity though the details vary. It will be noticed that in all three, the caudal fin is represented in its natural, or vertical position, the rays being indicated by the notches cut across the edge of the compressed terminal portion of the foot which is turned forward.

In figure 1 the head of the fish is triangular, and terminates in a truncated nose, on each side of which is the mouth, shown by incised lines. The eyes are two small round bits of clay without the usual line cut across them. Just back of these is the dorsal fin, and on each side of the long central opening of the foot are the pectoral fins, below which the artist has cut two rows of chevron-like lines, which, possibly, may have been suggested by bands of color upon the sides of many tropical fishes.

In figure 2 there is a slight change from figure 1 in the shape of the head, but the eyes and dorsal fin are in nearly the same relative positions, although varying in their details. The pectoral fins are absent, but the ventrals are represented although not directly opposite each other, and the bands of chevron-like lines are placed between these fins and the eyes.

In figure 3 there is a marked difference in the manner of representing the mouth. Curved lines are cut in a broad band of clay. Back of these is an enlarged dorsal, on each side of which are the pectoral fins, the eyes being omitted. Below, the ventral fins are introduced, and between them and the pectoral fins are the chevron bands nearly the same as in figure 2.

The foot from another tripod, given as figure 4, exhibits a result of this chevron ornament. In this all parts of the

fish are omitted except the pectoral and ventral fins which are placed on each side of the long opening in the foot, and the dorsal fin which is placed over it. Pendent from the knob representing the dorsal fin are the two chevron bands. In this conventionalized form a simplicity in ornament has been reached which is far more pleasing to the eye than are the crude and crowded expressions in the preceding figures.

As the two tripods with this chevron ornament are from graves near together, they may represent the successive efforts of the potter struggling to give expression to artistic feelings.

The Pectoral and Ventral Fins. Plate V. Figure 5 is another instance where an addition has been made to the characters of the fish. In this case the head is expressed by the nose and eyes which are carved in relief upon a triangular piece of clay added to the upper part of the foot. On each side of this piece of clay are the pectoral fins, while the ventral fins are united by a band of clay crossing the opening in the foot. On this band are several slight v-shaped indentures. As in the last figure and in the following, there is no attempt to represent the caudal fin.

A resultant form from the last is shown in figure 6. In this the general curved outline of the head, or mouth, of the fish is retained as the upper border of the foot, while the pectoral and ventral fins are expressed by rather large pieces of clay with deep notches.

Two more lines are to be traced in this conventionalism of the fish. In one the mouth is the essential feature and in the other the dorsal fin. They both start from a realistic form like fig. 2, Pl. IV, but they soon diverge and the results are decidedly different.

The Mouth. Plate VI. In figure 1, as will be seen, the mouth, with its pointed jaws, is the essential feature. The pectoral fins are at the angles of the mouth. The eyes are in their normal position. The dorsal and ventral fins are absent. The caudal is represented as in fig. 2, Pl. IV.

In figure 2 the pointed nose and mouth are prominent features. The pectoral and caudal fins are not striated. The eyes are similar to those in figure 1.

In figure 3 the deep lines cut in the bands of clay forming the jaws, and others between them representing the teeth, are evidence that the thoughts of the artist were concentrated upon representing the mouth of a fish. The pointed nose in the previous figure here gives way to the forced expression of a mouth, and is placed on the under jaw, with a license similar to that used in representing the eyes in fig. 3, Pl. IV. The pectoral fins are in the same position as in the two preceding figures, while the ventral fins are copied from the realistic form. The caudal fin has entirely given way to a rounded knob.

In figure 4 there is a raised pointed portion over the opening in the foot. On this part a deep line is cut corresponding to the line which gives emphasis to the jaw in the preceding figure. The striated patch of clay on each side below the angle of the mouth represents the pectoral fins. All other parts of the fish are wanting.

In figure 5 the pointed jaw alone is preserved in the mass of clay placed above the opening in the foot; and, finally, in figure 6, the climax in this line of conventionalism is reached by cutting two sets of oblique lines on the surface of the foot itself.

The Dorsal Fin. Plate VII. In the final series, the prominence which the dorsal fin is to have is exemplified by figure 1. In this, the mouth, eyes and pectoral fins

are all prominent, realistic features, and the dorsal fin is conspicuous by its size and position forward of the eyes.

In figures 2 and 3, the several parts of the head, while rudely done, are expressive, and the dorsal fin placed between the eyes in both is a prominent feature. In figure 3, the teeth are represented by bands passing from jaw to jaw.

In figure 4 these bands become small rounded masses, while a larger one in the centre represents the dorsal fin, as it holds the same position as a striated knob in the following figure.

In figure 5 the mouth and teeth are represented by cut lines, and the ventral, as well as the pectoral fins, are shown somewhat as in fig. 3 of the preceding plate.

In figure 6 the pectoral fins are more closely united to the mouth than in the last, and the dorsal fin is a small striated cone in the centre of the raised lines forming the mouth.

The next step is shown in figure 7, where the pectoral and dorsal fins are represented by three small cones, between which are incised lines for the mouth and teeth.

In figure 8 a deep notch is cut on the upper part of the foot, defining the mouth of the fish under the raised knob representing the dorsal fin, on each side of which are two slight knobs for pectoral fins.

In figure 9 all the parts have been eliminated except the dorsal fin, or the round striated knob above the opening in the foot. On one of the feet of the same tripod the incised lines on the knob are omitted, and in this we find the conventionalized fish reduced to its simplest form,—which may be represented by my period.



RAVES IN TENNESSEE.

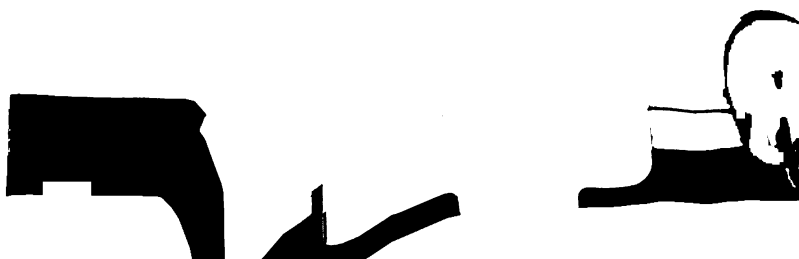




FIG. 1.

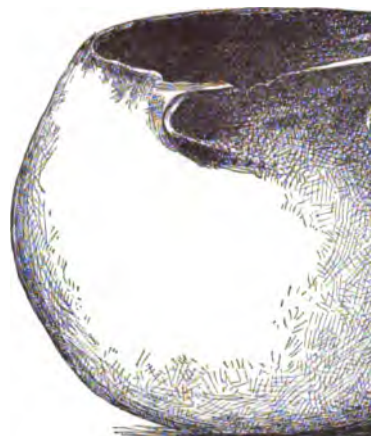


FIG. 2.



FIG. 3.

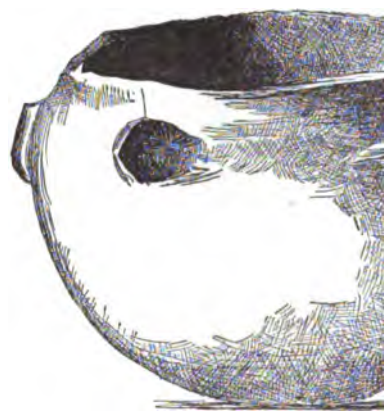


FIG. 4.

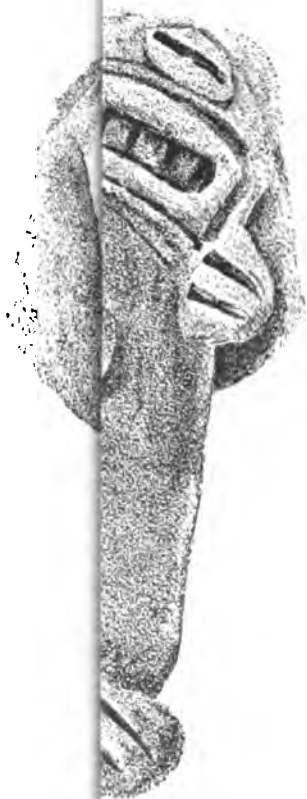


FIG. 7.

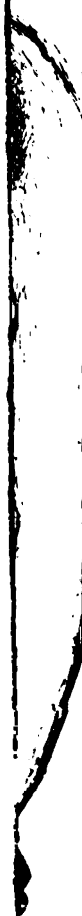


FIG. 8.

GRAVES IN TENNESSEE.







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